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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 008402

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TAGS: PREL JO

SUBJECT: TENSIONS APPARANT ON HANDLING OPPOSITION

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Classified By: CHARGE' D'AFFAIRES DAVID HALE, REASONS 1.4 (B) & (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. Interior Minister Habashneh, taking his cue from the King, has continued to apply pressure on the Muslim Brotherhood, with a series of arrests of activist preachers and threats to prosecute certain MPs. Each step he takes seems to be reversed the following day by PM Fayed, who continues to advocate dialogue and compromise with the Islamist opposition. The debate over handling the opposition is beginning to take East Bank/West Bank colorings, as East Bankers accuse the opposition of pursuing &foreign8, i.e. Palestinian agendas. Palestinians rebut that the East Bankers, paranoid about the long-term consequences of a stalled peace process, are embarked on a campaign of pressure and discrimination. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Recent weeks have seen intensified interaction between the government and the Islamist opposition, as Interior Minister Habashneh pursues the King's command to ensure that only the &proper8 message of Islam is spread from pulpits. In order to dampen vitriolic anti-western, radical sermons, large numbers of unlicensed Muslim Brotherhood (MB) preachers were arrested. The MB has fought back rhetorically, confirming an intent to obey the law while critiquing the government's heavy handed tactics and launching a counteroffensive attacking longstanding, restrictive GOJ policy on granting nationality to certain categories of Palestinians (reftel).

¶3. (C) Contrary trends within the cabinet on handling the opposition are apparent, however. With each hard swing from the Interior Minister, the Prime Minister a day later extends the olive branch, insisting on releases of detainees, the dropping of charges, and enhanced dialogue. Such regime stalwarts as Senate President Zeid al-Rifai told Charge that this does not represent a &good cop, bad cop8 strategy, but genuine division within the cabinet. No stranger to iron-fist tactics himself, Rifai lamented that the PM neither understands the potential danger of dissension posed by the Islamist elements, nor has the stomach to preside over tough actions by others in his government. Without leadership from the PM, the MB and their parliamentary wing, the Islamic Action Front (IAF) would continue to fan extremism and hamper the government in parliament. Rifai noted that over 60 MPs (the core of the King's men in the Lower House -- were meeting with Fayed on October 7 to try to stiffen him to keep the pressure on the MB. As we have heard from the King's advisors, Rifai predicted that Fayed, tenure over a reshuffled cabinet would be short-lived if he does not succeed in taming both the MB and their secular twins in opposition, the highly politicized, radical professional associations. MP Mohammad Arsalan (East Banker, Zarqa - first district) told PolOff October 7 that a majority of MPs were growing increasingly alarmed by IAF aggressiveness. He and some of his colleagues were in the process of drafting a letter to PM Fayed - which he expected up to 70 MPs to sign - urging him to take a harder line against the Islamists. (Note: The IAF holds 17 seats, and can count on an additional three independent members. The lower house consists of 110 members.)

¶4. (C) Another former PM, and hardcore East Banker, expressed a similar analysis to Charge. Fayed Tarawneh anticipated more arrests of extremist preachers, and believed popular opinion was supportive (he took pride in having the radical sermonizer in his smart, West Amman mosque sacked for talking politics, not religion, from the pulpit). Tarawneh saw a HAMAS agenda behind the efforts of the Palestinian-origin activists in the MB/IAF, who he claimed used the moderate, East Bank leadership of the MB as a front. He suggested that Fayed was entering into his reshuffled government on shaky ground with the King and the traditional East Bank constituencies who see his conciliatory manner toward the opposition as a sign of weakness.

¶5. (C) Putting aside certain personality quirks, Fayed faces a genuine dilemma: he has been handed simultaneously a reformist agenda and a command to crack down on an opposition element that is adept at advancing its cause by playing by the rules. Persistent, public differences with his own Interior Minister also indicate that Fayed is not in charge of all elements of his cabinet, as Habashneh is almost certainly coordinating with the GID, where the sentiments expressed by Tarawneh and Rifai would be seen if anything as

too soft.

16. (C) This chapter is also a demonstration of how Palestinian issues continue to bedevil Jordanian politics. Violence in the West Bank and Gaza, and the absence of visible diplomatic progress, flavors this debate. Palestinian activists here seek to use the few existing channels for political organization ) the MB and the professional associations ) to exploit popular unhappiness. East Bankers see in diplomatic paralysis a diminishing hope of a two-state solution ) and by extension, fear that old issues of Jordan's national identity and relationship with the West Bank could be revived to their detriment. However misplaced such fears may be to western ears, they are an element in current agitation over the MB and its &Palestinian8 agenda.

HALE